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Simon J. James

'The Truth about Gissing': Reassessing the Literary Friendship of George Gissing and

H.G. Wells

George Gissing, over-sensitive and often awkward in company, was not an especially sociable member of London's literary world. He did belong, however, to the Omar Khayyám Club, at whose dinner on 20<sup>th</sup> November 1896 he met for the first time Arthur Conan Doyle and H.G. Wells. Previously, Gissing's closest friends were the writers Eduard Bertz and Morley Roberts, but Bertz had returned to his native Germany, and the unreliable Roberts was often abroad. Following this meeting Wells became Gissing's closest friend until Gissing's death seven years later, and the recent publication of editions of both writers' letters allows a reassessment of their friendship and of Wells's writings about Gissing.<sup>1</sup>

Gissing noted in his diary that he liked Wells's 'wild face and naive manner'; he wrote in his first letter to Wells, 'personally you come so near my ideal of the brotherly man of letters.' To another (unknown) correspondent, he added that Wells is 'the only one of the younger men whom I have met, that I can like & talk freely with,' and to Clara Collet, a close (platonic) friend, he wrote:

We get on quite astonishingly well; this is the only case in which I have been able to make friends with a new writer. Wells's sole defect is his lack of a classical education; he makes up for this by singular sweetness of disposition, a wonderfully active mind, & a ceaseless flow of merriment. I believe he will do fine work, for has a literary conscience & no touch of vulgarity in his views on life.

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1 *The Letters of George Gissing*, 9 vols, ed. by Pierre Coustillas, Paul F. Mattheisen and Arthur C. Young (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1992); *The Correspondence of H.G. Wells*, 4 vols (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1998), ed. by David C. Smith. Following the editors' own preferences, I shall refer throughout to the Gissing collection as *Letters* and the Wells selection as *Correspondence*. The former largely supersedes, and corrects a few editorial errors of *George Gissing and H.G. Wells: A Record of their Friendship and Correspondence*, ed. by Royal A. Gettmann (London: Hart-Davis, 1961). It does, however, contain most of Wells's critical writing on Gissing, with the significant omission of Wells's book-review 'The Truth about Gissing', *Rhythm Literary Supplement*, December 1912, i-iv, reprinted in the *New York Times Review of Books*, 13th January 1913, p. 9. As will become apparent, I take issue with a number of judgements in Gettmann's introduction.

He later added, 'In Wells there is more genuine *goodness* than in any man I have ever intimately known.'<sup>2</sup>

What had brought them together initially was a resemblance of one of Gissing's novels to Wells's own life. Wells later wrote:

I had read and admired Gissing's *In the Year of the Jubilee* and his *New Grub Street* before I met him and I began our first conversation by remarking upon the coincidence that Reardon, in the latter book, lived like myself as a struggling writer in Mornington Road with a wife named Amy.<sup>3</sup>

As the two men subsequently discovered, the resemblances between Gissing himself and Wells were greater still: both had emerged from lower-middle-class shopkeeping backgrounds, and survived traumatic adolescent experiences, Wells's apprenticeships to drapers and Gissing's imprisonment for theft. While these similarities may have initially drawn them together, however, there were significant differences in their temperaments and artistic aims. Reardon, in Gissing's pessimistic novel, parts from Amy and eventually dies; Wells's Amy was 'Jane', the student for whom he had left his first wife and to whom he would be persistently unfaithful.<sup>4</sup> The differences between the two men could be a source of strength in their friendship for Gissing, but often made Wells want to argue belligerently with his gloomier friend. Wells, like the title of one of Reardon's novels, *The Optimist*, saw himself as acting as a corrective to Gissing's needless pessimism: his version of the literary life painfully described in *New Grub Street* is the humorous sketch 'In a Literary Household.'<sup>5</sup> Gissing accepted more placidly the differences between himself and the boisterous younger man, and habitually responded to Wells's criticisms with self-deprecating good humour, glorying in turn in his friend's 'natural powers [...] developed under

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2 *London and the Life of Literature in Late Victorian England: The Diary of George Gissing, Novelist*, ed. by Pierre Coustillas (Hassocks: Harvester, 1978), p. 427; *Letters*, vi, pp. 200, 278, 283 and 296.

3 H.G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*, 2 vols (London: Gollancz, 1934), ii, p. 567.

4 John Halperin, *Gissing: A Life in Books* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 237, mistakenly identifies Amy as Wells's first wife Isabel, not Amy Catherine, nicknamed 'Jane', his second.

5 H.G. Wells, *Certain Personal Matters* (London: Lawrence and Bullen, 1898), pp. 42-48. Subsequent references to Wells's works will be to the Atlantic edition unless otherwise noted.

such unfavourable conditions.<sup>6</sup> He seemed to relish without envy the commercial success of 'one of those born to prosperity' and was generous in his praise of Wells.<sup>7</sup>

As R.A. Gettmann has noted, in the year they first met, Wells earned £1,056 7s 9d, while Gissing's earnings had declined from a record £453 in 1894 to £289 13s 7d.<sup>8</sup> 1895 and 1896 were by far Gissing's most productive years: he diversified his output into short stories, a form he had largely hitherto considered beneath his artistic dignity, and also completed one of his best novels, *The Whirlpool*. The output of these two years pales, however, besides the fertility and generic variation of Wells's during the same period: *Select Conversations with an Uncle*, *The Time Machine*, *The Wonderful Visit*, *The Stolen Bacillus*, *The Wheels of Chance* and *The Island of Doctor Moreau*. Wells also showed a far greater willingness to 'journalise', in Reardon's phrase, publishing more than 450 items between 1893 and 1896 alone.<sup>9</sup> In contrast to Wells's hyper-productivity, Gissing often made frequent false starts before committing himself to the completion of a book. In 1900 he even instructed his agent Pinker to burn an entire finished novel, *Among the Prophets*, whose anti-spiritualism theme is shared by Wells's *Love and Mr Lewisham* published in the same year. Although this Gissing-influenced novel cost Wells Gissing- or Reardon-like pains, Wells generally found Gissing's slowness of production incomprehensible, attributing it to his over-idealised conception of the artistic vocation.<sup>10</sup>

This divergence of opinions was thrown into sharp relief by their shared holiday in Rome in 1898 (for all of Wells's subsequent accusations of impracticality, Gissing planned the whole trip, as Wells had never been abroad before).<sup>11</sup> Gissing prized his classical education, arguably as one of the few tokens of a class status his

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6 *Letters*, vi, p. 252.

7 *Letters*, ix, p. 91.

8 R.A. Gettmann, ed., *George Gissing and H.G. Wells*, p. 15.

9 George Gissing, *New Grub Street*, ed. by Bernard Bergonzi (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 108; Introduction to *Select Conversations with an Uncle*, with *Two Hitherto Unreprinted Conversations*, ed. by David C. Smith and Patrick Parrinder (University of North London Press, 1992), p. 10.

10 The *Daily Chronicle* review of *Love and Mr. Lewisham* contrasts Wells's 'scientific' treatment of the lower-middle-class subject favourably to Gissing's: Patrick Parrinder, ed., *H.G. Wells: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 80. Gissing's enjoyment of the novel is recorded in a letter to Wells, *Letters*, vii, p. 66. For its similarities to Gissing's own work, see Bernard Bergonzi, 'The Correspondence of Gissing and Wells', in *The Turn of a Century* (London: Macmillan, 1973), 64-71 (pp. 68-70) and a letter from Wells in *Arnold Bennett and H.G. Wells: A Record of a Personal and Literary Friendship*, ed. Harris Wilson (London: Hart-Davis, 1960), p. 48.

11 Patrick Parrinder, 'The Roman Spring of George Gissing and H.G. Wells', *Gissing Newsletter*, 21.3 (1985), 1-12; *Letters*, vii, pp. 55-56, pp. 63-64. For a recently-published account of the trip, see Brian Ború Dunne, *With Gissing in Italy* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1999).

income did not otherwise allow him, but in Wells's 1934 *Experiment in Autobiography*, Gissing is accused of being 'an extraordinary blend of a damaged joy-loving human being hampered by inherited gentility and a classical education [...] at the back of my mind I thought him horribly miseducated and he hardly troubled to hide from me his opinion that I was absolutely illiterate.'<sup>12</sup> Although Wells enjoyed the holiday (perhaps because of a temperamental attraction to ruined cities and doomed civilisations), he was bemused and irritated by Gissing's superior knowledge of their surroundings. The sister of Beatrice Webb, Rosalind Williams (later Dobbs), with whom Gissing had a brief affair, first met both men in Rome and paid tribute to Gissing's 'intellectual superiority.' Perhaps Wells, thinking of his own abandoned scientific training, was envious of the intelligence and erudition Gissing had wasted on such a nonetheless futile subject.<sup>13</sup>

Through Gissing I was confirmed in my suspicion that this orthodox classical training which was once so powerful an antiseptic against [...] Egyptian dogma and natural superstitions, is now no longer a city of refuge from barbaric predispositions. It has become a vast collection of monumental masonry, a pale cemetery in a twilight, through which new conceptions hurry apologetically on their way to town, finding neither home nor sustenance there. It is a cemetery, which [...] can give little to life but a certain sparkle in the water and breed nothing any more but ghosts, *ignes fatui* and infections. It has ceased to be a field of education.<sup>14</sup>

When confronted with reverence for antiquity, Wells tended to over-emphasise his tendencies towards iconoclastic philistinism:

I'm not coming to Rome a sight seeing. I don't care a trituated damn for all the blessed oil paintings in the world, & precious little for the sculpture, & I'm

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<sup>12</sup> *Autobiography*, ii, pp. 569 and 571.

<sup>13</sup> Rosalind Dobbs, 'Biographical Sketches', unpublished MS held in the library of the London School of Economics; Patrick Parrinder, *Shadows of the Future: H.G. Wells, Science Fiction and Prophecy* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1995), pp. 71-72.

<sup>14</sup> *Autobiography*, ii, p. 572.

not going to be made to go and see places I shouldn't go to see if I lived in Rome.<sup>15</sup>

Gissing's fiction often attempts to defend a limited, if ineffectual, form of high culture such as classical learning, which should exist for its own sake. The scientific metaphor of 'antiseptic' in the *Autobiography* reveals the basis of Wells's separation from such a late Victorian ideal of an autonomous culture. For the more aesthetically-inclined Gissing (and still more so for Henry James, another friend-cum-antagonist of Wells) the instrumental qualities of a work of art are subordinate to the work's perfection as the 'thing-in-itself', even at the expense of blurring or confusing the novel's ideological intent. Wells's conception of culture, fiction included, was to insist upon it becoming committed, useful, teleological. 'Fiction is necessarily concrete and definite,' he wrote in *Anticipations* (1901). 'It permits of no open alternatives; its aim of illusion prevents a proper amplitude of demonstration, and modern prophecy should be, one suspects, a branch of speculation, and should follow with all decorum the scientific method.'<sup>16</sup>

Gissing's cultured classicism, conspicuous in *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (1902-03), is necessarily predicated on a limited valorisation of the past, the opposite of Wells's forward-looking scientific meliorism. Gissing might have stood as the type of the unproductive backward-looking man Wells satirises in his 1902 pamphlet *The Discovery of the Future*. Morley Roberts wrote of Gissing:

He lived in the past, and was conscious every day that something in the past that he loved was dying and must vanish. No form of future civilisation, whatever it might be, which was gained by means implying the destruction of what he chiefly loved, could ever appeal to him.<sup>17</sup>

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15 *Letters*, vii, p. 41. One might also compare Gissing's appalled, and Wells's enthusiastic reactions to the destruction of classical antiquities in *Letters*, iv, p. 165 and *Bernard Shaw and H.G. Wells*, ed. by J. Percy Smith (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), pp. 195-96. See also H.G. Wells, *The Future in America A Search After Realities* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1906), p. 326.

16 H.G. Wells, *Anticipations of the Reaction of Scientific Progress Upon Human Life and Thought* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1902), p. 2n. See also H.G. Wells, 'The Contemporary Novel' in *An Englishman Looks at the World* (London: Cassell, 1914), pp. 148-69.

17 Morley Roberts, *The Private Life of Henry Maitland: A Record Dictated by J.H.*, 2nd edn. (London: Eveleigh Nash, 1912), p. 174.

Gissing's actual response to Wells's enthusiasm for the future was more fatalist still:

I have a conviction that all I love & believe in is going to the devil; at the same time, I try to watch with interest this process of destruction, admiring any bit of sapper-work that is well done.<sup>18</sup>

Gissing saw his cherished high culture as doomed by its own lack of appeal compared to vulgarised art, 'popular' or 'mass' culture, constituting another important difference from Wells. *New Grub Street* satirises *Tit-Bits*; Wells began his literary career by writing for it. Gissing forbade his son to hear 'blackguard' singers on the beach; Wells briefly chooses this occupation for Bert Smallways, the hero of *The War in the Air*.<sup>19</sup> Gissing and Wells may be seen as engaged in the lasting cultural debate between Art and Science that occupied the friends T.H. Huxley and Matthew Arnold in the 1880s and, more acrimoniously, the 'Wellsian' C.P. Snow and 'high-cultural' F.R. Leavis in the 1950s.<sup>20</sup> The closest that Gissing had ever come to adopting a scientific turn of mind was his youthful flirtation with Positivism; both Positivism's founder Auguste Comte and Gissing's friend and former employer, the leading English Positivist Frederic Harrison are mocked by Wells, who accused Gissing of believing that 'modern science and thought were merely degenerate recapitulations of [the ancients'] lofty and inaccessible wisdom.'<sup>21</sup>

Gissing's idealising of the past was coupled with Schopenhauerian pessimism about the future, contemplating the limits on the improvement of the conditions of humanity's existence with sympathy but, predominantly, gloom.<sup>22</sup> Gissing hoped for an improvement in the conditions of life for the most unfairly disadvantaged members

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<sup>18</sup> *Letters*, vi, p. 320.

<sup>19</sup> *Gissing and Wells*, p. 17; *Letters*, vi, p. 35.

<sup>20</sup> See Matthew Arnold, 'Literature and Science', in *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, 10 vols, ed. by R.H. Super (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1974) x, pp. 53-73; C.P. Snow, *The Two Cultures and The Two Cultures: A Second Look*, ed. by Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

<sup>21</sup> H.G. Wells, *The Discovery of the Future*, pp. 31-32; H.G. Wells, *The Food of the Gods* (London: Unwin, 1925), p. 110; H.G. Wells, *Mankind in the Making*, p. 372. Martha S. Vogeler, 'H.G. Wells and Positivism,' in *H.G. Wells under Revision: Proceedings of the International H.G. Wells Symposium, London, July 1986*, ed. by Patrick Parrinder and Christopher Rolfe (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, and London: Associated University Presses, 1990), pp. 181-91; *Autobiography*, ii, p. 571; compare *Letters*, vi, p. 283; see also *Mankind in the Making*, p. 334.

of society – the very poor, under-educated women, and unsuccessful but gifted artists such as himself – but did not permit himself to imagine anything more comprehensive or expansive beyond this, seeing human nature as too rigid to be altered effectively by the kind of social and political utopias explored in Wells's writing. The hero of *Demos* (1886) is a would-be socialist reformer who is stoned to death by an angry mob. The narrator of 1889's *The Nether World* wearily despairs of the possibility 'an entire change of economic conditions', and the novel portrays an amateur utopian economist whose speculations are futile on a wage of a pound a week.<sup>23</sup> Gissing sometimes overstated his antipathy to social reconstruction: he wrote of Wells's first son as 'one, I hope, whose life will look into a better time', and affirmed in response to 1903's *Mankind in the Making* that 'undoubtedly it behoves us before all else to lighten as best we can the lot of those for whose being we are responsible.'<sup>24</sup> He also praised Wells's first volume of utopian speculations *Anticipations* (1901) for its artistic sincerity:

I must not pretend to care very much about the future of the human race; come what may, folly & misery are sure to be the prevalent features of life; but your ingenuity in speculation, the breadth of your views, & the vigour of your writing, make this book vastly enjoyable. The critical part of it satisfies & often delights me; you have told truths that clamour for the telling, & that in language quite your own.<sup>25</sup>

For Gissing, the limits of human nature and of knowledge had to be acknowledged: in response to *The Discovery of the Future* he wrote:

Your declared belief in the 'coherency & purpose' of things is pleasant to me. For I myself cannot doubt for one moment that purpose there is. On the other

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22 See Gissing's Schopenhauerian essay, unpublished in his lifetime in order not to offend Harrison, 'The Hope of Pessimism', in *Essays and Fiction*, ed. by Pierre Coustillas (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1970), pp. 76-97.

23 George Gissing, *The Nether World*, ed. by Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 109.

24 *Letters*, viii, p. 127, ix, p. 137.

25 *Letters*, viii, p. 275.



hand, I do doubt whether *we* – in any sense of the pronoun – shall ever be granted an understanding of that purpose.<sup>26</sup>

Wells, infuriated, saw the modesty of this ambition as a waste of the ‘richest possibilities’ of Gissing’s nature: waste of human potential was the dominant theme of Wells’s both fictional and political work during the 1890s and 1900s.<sup>27</sup> In the case of Gissing, he also interpreted it as a refusal to grow up. ‘The treatment of the work of Mr Gissing as a progress, an adolescence is inevitable,’ he had written earlier.<sup>28</sup> Gissing wrote apologetically to Wells of ‘the immaturity discoverable in all my work’; even Gissing’s lover Gabrielle Fleury complained (although perhaps with no greater reliability) that ‘with regard to practical life, everyday life, George is like a child.’<sup>29</sup>

Wells found Gissing’s views about women the most annoying aspect of his over-prolonged adolescence. (Lovat Dickson has suggested that the more sexually-active Wells may yet have been jealous of Gissing’s, in Wells’s own phrase, ‘extremely good-looking’ appearance.)<sup>30</sup> Gissing’s first wife Nell had been an alcoholic prostitute whom Gissing had met as a student of eighteen: the money he had been caught stealing at Owen’s College was intended to buy her a sewing-machine. Their subsequent marriage was not a success, but after Nell’s death in 1888, Gissing felt that no middle-class woman would tolerate his poverty. He married another working-class woman in 1891, Edith, from whom he was also planning to separate by the time he first met Wells.<sup>31</sup> ‘A fool fails of happiness,’ rules *Love and Mr Lewisham*’s Chaffery (whose name may echo that of the restaurant Chaffey’s in Gissing’s 1898 novella *The Town Traveller*). ‘Because of his insufficient mind, he miscalculates, he stumbles and hobbles, some cant or claptrap whirls him away; he gets passion out of a book and a wife out of the stews [...] he fails by blindness.’<sup>32</sup>

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26 *Letters*, viii, p. 340. Gissing’s letter also reproves Wells for the hint of religious belief near the end of the pamphlet: *The Discovery of the Future*, p. 34; later Wells would refute the calumny that Gissing had converted to Christianity on his deathbed (*Autobiography*, ii, pp. 580-81).

27 H.G. Wells, ‘George Gissing: An Impression’, *Gissing and Wells*, 260-77 (p. 267).

28 H.G. Wells, ‘The Novels of Mr George Gissing’, *Gissing and Wells*, 239-59 (p. 248).

29 *Letters*, vii, p. 319, viii, p. 202.

30 Lovat Dickson, *H.G. Wells: His Turbulent Life and Times* (London: Macmillan, 1971), p. 73; *Autobiography*, ii, p. 567.

31 *Autobiography*, ii, p. 569.

32 H.G. Wells, *Love and Mr Lewisham* (London: Unwin, 1925), p. 478; compare ‘George Gissing: An Impression’, p. 264 and H.G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia* (London: Unwin, 1925), p. 51.

This passage may be a swipe at Gissing's refusal to progress in the way Wells wanted him to; Wells might also have been remembering Gissing when the narrator of *A Modern Utopia* (1905) holidays with a childish, woman-idealising botanist (Gissing inherited an interest in botany from his father).

Wells subsequently accused Gissing of idealising the degenerate Nell as his 'Primary Fixation. For him she had been Woman.'<sup>33</sup> The friends agreed to disagree about the ending of Gissing's domestic fantasy 'Out of the Fashion' in which the narrator approves of a wife's sacrifice of her life to her selfish family. 'Why, you & I differ to a certain extent on the one great subject,' Gissing wrote to the champion of free love and would-be re-builder of the family.<sup>34</sup> Although a serially unfaithful husband, in his peculiar way Wells always tried to be fair to both wife and mistresses, and felt that Gissing had mistreated Edith. Replying to a letter from Wells that he had destroyed, the hurt Gissing replied:

Well, my dear boy, this is candour with a vengeance. But you are too severe. My error has been in bearing so long with a woman who has used me so unmercifully. Of course I did it for the children's sake. [...] To them is my first responsibility, & I shall always recognize it.

Don't misinterpret me harshly. I did not think your criticism of my view of life went so far; I ought to have kept silence about these things. [...]

I myself am absolutely free from moral obligations to the woman I married. [...]

Far less energy of reproof would have stopped my mouth on such matters. Why were you so vehement?

Yours,

George Gissing

Why shouldn't I speak plainly? It is Mlle Fleury, & if your life had been as lonely as mine, you would think very differently about one's relations with such a woman.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> *Autobiography*, ii, p. 569.

<sup>34</sup> George Gissing, *Human Odds and Ends* (London: Lawrence and Bullen, 1898), pp. 303-08; *Letters*, vii, p. 116.

<sup>35</sup> *Letters*, vii, pp. 157-58.

Gabrielle Fleury had written to Gissing asking permission to translate *New Grub Street*, and they first met at Wells's home. The intellectual *bourgeoise* Gabrielle was a much more suitable partner for Gissing than either of his wives had been, and they very quickly fell in love. Gissing was unable to divorce Edith, however, and the couple were obliged to move to Gabrielle's native France. Wells initially approved of the arrangement, but in time irritably thought Gabrielle's practical incompetence and pretensions to gentility and high culture even worse than Gissing's. The enmity reached its height in a dispute over Gissing's health. Wells worried about the quality of Gissing's diet (a lifelong preoccupation for both men); a visit to Gissing in Paris provoked the fear that the rations dispensed by Gabrielle's mother were dangerously insufficient, a view apparently borne out by Gissing's letters.<sup>36</sup> On Gissing's return to England in 1901 to consult Wells's regular physician and Gissing's school friend Henry Hick, Gabrielle became convinced that the Wellses were turning Gissing against her. In the question of his health, she was right: Wells had decided to 'brutalise the situation', taking charge of feeding Gissing up and refusing to answer any more letters from Gabrielle (although Jane continued to return the courtesy).<sup>37</sup> Even Gissing's deathbed in 1903 was attended by a disagreement about whether Gissing should be fed or starved, Wells and Gabrielle each accusing the other of worsening the patient's condition.<sup>38</sup> (Wells is supposed to have drawn upon his memories of Gissing's deathbed for the death of Uncle Ponderevo in 1909's *Tono-Bungay*, as he did Gissing's illness for Masterman in 1905's *Kipps*.)<sup>39</sup> Gissing died the day after Wells's visit, and his subsequent treatment of Gissing's memory and of Gabrielle may owe something to the emotions stirred at St-Jean-de-Luz.

I felt like a flitting soul hurrying past Anubis and hesitating at strange misleading turnings on the lonely Pathway of the Dead. I forget every detail of the inn but I still remember that sick-room acutely.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> *Letters*, viii, pp. 166 and 183.

<sup>37</sup> *Autobiography*, ii, pp. 577-78.

<sup>38</sup> See *Letters*, pp. ix and xxvi, for the suggestion that Wells's overfeeding may in fact have contributed to Gissing's death.

<sup>39</sup> Ingvald Raknem, *H.G. Wells and his Critics* (London and Norway: Allen, 1962), p. 88.

<sup>40</sup> *Autobiography*, ii, p. 579. See David C. Smith, *H.G. Wells: Desperately Mortal: A Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), pp. 17, 152 and 530, for the effect of Gissing's death on Wells.

Wells's behaviour after 1903 has aroused much controversy regarding the harshness of his judgements both on Gissing's personality and writing. As early as 1896, in *The Wheels of Chance*, Wells's narrator suggests that the hero's 'real life is absolutely uninteresting, and if he faced it as realistically as people do in Mr. Gissing's novels, he would probably have come by way of drink to suicide in the course of a year.'<sup>41</sup> Wells's first critical writing on Gissing was a review of *Eve's Ransom* entitled 'The Depressed School' in which he is criticised for a form of realism that excludes the representation of happiness; in a theatre review in 1896, Wells uses the word 'Gissingized', to mean 'limited to the grey realities of life.'<sup>42</sup> Reviewing *The Paying Guest* (also 1896), Wells disapproves of its distant authorial presence and grim irony, but is kinder to this uncharacteristically farcical production. 'The Novels of Mr George Gissing', published in the *Contemporary Review* in August 1897 after they had become friends, shows Wells at his most generous: he places Gissing as the most important of the English followers of Tolstoy, Zola and Turgenev, and *The Paying Guest* is compared to Jane Austen.<sup>43</sup> 'As soon as Mr Gissing's novels are read with a view to their structural design and implications they become very significant literature indeed,' he adds. Consequently he is full of praise for the recently-published *The Whirlpool*, one of Gissing's finest novels, which has a 'structural theme' of commercial and financial London life not unlike Wells's later *Tono-Bungay*. Wells approves of the hero's 'discovery of the insufficiency of the cultivated life and its necessary insincerities' (p. 258), and while correctly noting in the book's ending 'a discussion, in fact, between a conception of spacious culture and a conception of survival', he severely misreads this debate's ironic conclusion.<sup>44</sup>

After Gissing's death, rather than being, as John Halperin claims, 'persistently and perversely disloyal to [Gissing's] memory,' Wells was capable of both generosity

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41 *Love and Mr Lewisham*, p. 50. *Gissing's Diary*, p. 428, records reading the novel 'in which I find my name is mentioned'. The first Wells novel Gissing read was probably *The Time Machine*: a letter to Henry Hick admires the novel but, characteristically, complains that surely the Eloi would desert Britain for somewhere warmer (*Letters*, vi, p. 63).

42 *Gissing and Wells*, pp. 234-37; H.G. Wells, 'Delia Harding', *H.G. Wells's Literary Criticism*, ed. by Patrick Parrinder and Robert M. Philmus (Brighton: Harvester, 1980), 36-39 (p. 36). Gissing's reaction to the former is recorded in *Letters*, v, p. 323.

43 'The Novels of Mr George Gissing', *Gissing and Wells*, pp. 242-59.

44 *Gissing and Wells*, pp. 257-58, *Letters*, vii, p. 320. There is also a damning line of rather faint praise for Gissing in a passage about improving the average citizen in 1903's *Mankind in the Making* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1903), p. 159.

and mean-spiritedness.<sup>45</sup> Replying to a letter of condolence from Henry Landers, Wells describes Gissing, as 'one of the most agreeable of companions & the most lovable of men.'<sup>46</sup> His exasperation had not ebbed, however: only seven days after Gissing's death, Wells wrote to Edmund Gosse, 'Gissing was a most amiable decent man but an absolute fool, outside the covers of a book, in all arrangements and affairs.'<sup>47</sup> Wells and Gosse, who had previously arranged a Civil List pension for Gissing's even poorer novelist brother Algernon, attempted to arrange a pension for Gissing's sons. (Wells's own two sons were only a few years younger, and he was still enquiring about them by 1916, the year of Walter Gissing's death.)<sup>48</sup>

The pension was eventually secured, but Wells further incurred Gabrielle's hostility by suggesting that it might be jeopardised were she to visit England as Gissing's 'widow'.<sup>49</sup> More trouble arose around Gissing's final, uncompleted book, the historical novel *Veranilda*, the material for which he had discussed with Wells as early as 1897.<sup>50</sup> Wells, hoping to increase the novel's saleable value, wrote a preface which he claimed to be for 'purposes not critical but seductive,' but which was rejected by Gissing's family as too biographically revealing and insufficiently appreciative of Gissing's gifts as a novelist. The portrait Wells draws of the classical pedant too impractical to rise out of poverty is perhaps drawn less from Gissing's own life and too much from *New Grub Street*: Wells did not actually know the schoolboy Gissing that he describes, and the overall impression of Gissing's personality is rather over-aestheticised, or even fictionalised. He pays tribute to a number of Gissing's virtues, but laments the 'practical incapacity, that curious inability to do the sane, secure thing' that he believed made Gissing's everyday life so difficult; poverty is blamed for his friend's condition, but also 'sheer inability to manage.'<sup>51</sup> Wells took too much at face value the modesty of Gissing's own self-deprecating statements about the quality of his novels, praising them while indicating the unsuitability of their subject-matter for one of Gissing's temperament. However, he berates the reading-public for not having shown Gissing the recognition he deserved. Wells again

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45 Halperin, p. 237; see also p. 353.

46 *Correspondence*, ii, p. 3.

47 *Gissing and Wells*, pp. 225-26.

48 *Letters*, ix, pp. 172-73; *Correspondence*, ii, pp. 9-10, 433 and 434. The third of these letters is printed by mistake again in iii, pp. 215-16.

49 *Correspondence*, ii, p. 17.

50 *Letters*, vi, p. 293.

51 *Gissing and Wells*, pp. 264 and 267-68.

notes 'George Gissing's extraordinary power of comprehensive design' (p. 276) and praises *Veranilda* fulsomely:

It needs some practice in the art of imaginative writing to gauge quite how skilfully this magnificent conception has been wrought, to detect the subtle insistence, touch by touch, that keeps its mellow and melancholy atmosphere true. [...] Gissing carries his learning as a trained athlete carries his limbs, as it were, unwittingly, as a great artist saturated with the classical tradition might best desire to do. And he gains in permanence and beauty what he will lose in contemporary applause (p. 277).

Ellen Gissing described the piece as 'anything but a pleasing, and anything but a true picture of my brother.'<sup>52</sup> Wells altered his first draft, but to no avail, writing to Constable and Co., *Veranilda*'s publishers:

In the case of Mrs Gissing [presumably the novelist's mother] I am afraid nothing but gross praise would be satisfactory. I sympathise acutely with her feelings on the matter, but on the whole I think it advisable to maintain my tone of critical description.<sup>53</sup>

A short, poorly-written piece by Frederic Harrison was used instead, which also praises *Veranilda*, but to the detriment of Gissing's other, better work, and this did not help the book's subsequent reception.<sup>54</sup> With his usual lack of consideration, however, Wells published the rejected preface anyway in the *Monthly Review*, and later in *Living Age* and the *Eclectic Review*, as 'George Gissing: An Impression.'<sup>55</sup> As a result

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52 Unpublished letter in the Illinois archive, quoted in Pierre Coustillas's excellent article, 'The Stormy Publication of Gissing's *Veranilda*', *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, 72 (1968), (588-610), p. 592. Coustillas also records the subsequent hostility of the literary press to Wells's judgements on Gissing.

53 *Correspondence*, II, p. 14.

54 George Gissing, *Veranilda*, ed. by Pierre Coustillas (London: Constable, 1904; repr. Brighon: Harvester, 1987), pp. v-vii; Martha S. Vogeler, *Fredric Harrison: The Vocations of a Positivist* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984), pp. 326-28; *George Gissing: The Critical Heritage*, eds. Pierre Coustillas and Colin Partridge (London: Routledge, 1972), pp. 438, 445 and 447.

55 Smith, p. 153; John R. Harrison, 'The Rejected *Veranilda* Preface: Wells's View of Gissing as a Novelist', *Gissing Newsletter*, 18.4 (1982), 24-33; Jacob Korg, 'Some Unpublished Letters by Gabrielle Gissing', *Gissing Newsletter*, 5.4 (1969), 1-8; *Correspondence*, ii, p. 37n.

of the disagreement this provoked, Wells asked not to be a trustee of the pension. A letter to Gosse not included in the *Correspondence* demonstrates Wells's position:

But if you can make it clear to [Balfour, the Prime Minister] that there is not the slightest element of pique in the matter I should be very glad indeed to see the trusteeship of the pension in other hands than mine. I want this quite as much in the interests of the little boys as for my own peace of mind. Miss Collet has been offended through my want of tact, she is aggrieved in a [...] violent way and I do not want to see all that poor little property Gissing left dissipated in a campaign against me. [...]

When Gissing died I looked up his affairs, consulted Pinker & Algernon Gissing & (quite out of inadvertence) I didn't consult Miss Collet. I came to the conclusion that his estate might yield about £600 or £700 – more perhaps with care. One of the assets was an unfinished romance of the time of Theodoric called *Veranilda*. Unfinished as it was it was difficult to 'place' as Pinker puts it, and I suggested an introduction should be written [...] dealing generally with his work & pointing to what I knew to be the conclusion of the story. This introduction was written, was read and approved (with comments & suggestions) by Frederic Harrison, Morley Roberts, Algernon Gissing, Miss Gissing & others – & it was not sent to Miss Collet. It ignored certain alleged sentimental relations of Gissing's that I don't believe in. (It's a purely literary introduction.) Messrs Constable & Co. agreed to pay £300 down on the book with the introduction [...] when Miss Collet arose in her wrath. As executrix she delayed & finally stopped the appearance of the book with my introduction. [...] Constable fought hard to keep to the original understanding & now the book is to be published in a new agreement that secures the children only £150. This is a dear loss of £150 for them, and in addition Tauchnitz would I think have taken the work with my introduction but I doubt if he will without. All sorts of little increments to the estate have been neglected by Miss Collet in her sublime fury & I doubt if now it will work out at much more than £300. She has stirred up the sisters at Wakefield to a belief that my introduction is an insult to the memory of Gissing & generally made

things detestable to me. I will send you & Mr Balfour proofs of this introduction and you will see just how much insult there is in it.

But you see how difficult it will be to keep the peace between the executors & myself & to secure any effective cooperation for the welfare of the children. It is no fun for me to waste their substances in serious bickering. Miss Collet is fixed by this will as an executor and therefore the very best thing for the children & for her mental equilibrium & mine is for me to withdraw. I don't suggest for a moment that she should replace me. Miss Orme & Miss Gissing are perfectly sane good people and would be by far the best trustees. Miss Orme in particular has been admirable & generous throughout. She has given time, money & intelligence to Gissing's affairs, and for the best & most charitable of motives. [...]

I do hope Mr. Balfour will understand clearly that I am not withdrawing in any spirit of petulance. I am deeply grateful to him for the generosity that determined this pension and that has effectively secured these two poor little chaps from the dismal indigence that might have swallowed them up.<sup>56</sup>

In truth, the book is one of Gissing's weaker novels, as Roberts acknowledged in his own piece about Gissing later that year.<sup>57</sup> Wells puffed *Veranilda* to maximise the book's value. The vexation this unaccustomed rejection caused Wells, however, evidently tainted his subsequent relationship with Gissing's memory and, still more forcefully, with Gabrielle and Clara Collet, with whom he broke after the pension had been secured. Wells declared in a letter to Gissing's friend Edward Clodd the intention not 'to incur fresh hostility by being mixed up in any further Gissingism,' but this vow was broken seven years later in a review of the first two books published on Gissing.<sup>58</sup> Wells approves of Frank Swinnerton's patronising and deprecatory volume, which concludes that Gissing should never have been a novelist at all, and

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<sup>56</sup> British Library, Ashley MSS. 5736, ff. 2-5.

<sup>57</sup> Morley Roberts, 'The Exile of George Gissing', in Jean-Pierre Michaux, *George Gissing: Critical Essays* (London: Vision; Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble, 1981), 72-78 (pp. 77-78).

<sup>58</sup> *Correspondence*, ii, p. 269; see note 1 above.



does Gissing's reputation little good.<sup>59</sup> He compares Swinnerton's book favourably to Morley Roberts's *The Private Life of Henry Maitland*, a fictionalised version of Gissing's life that is woefully inaccurate and occasionally patronising, but at least genuinely affectionate.<sup>60</sup> Wells had given Roberts permission to see Gissing's letters to him, and had suggested to Roberts as early as 1904 'Why not make G.G. into a novel?' but was outraged by the book's thinly-disguised portrayals, including that of 'Rivers,' Wells himself.<sup>61</sup> Roberts correctly pays tribute to the enormous admiration Gissing had for Wells, but, perhaps jostling to be seen posthumously as Gissing's closest friend, demeans Wells and his achievements as a writer, accusing 'Rivers' of lying to the public about the merits of *Veranilda*.<sup>62</sup> Wells also excoriates Roberts for having 'rushed into print' with the revelation of Gissing's contracting a sexually-transmitted disease from Nell (though he had himself gone as far as revealing an early unhappy marriage in 'George Gissing: An Impression'), and for his lack of discretion throughout, since 'Maitland' is easily identifiable as Gissing.<sup>63</sup> Wells defends his assessment of *Veranilda* by his own particular set of aesthetic standards, confessing it 'not a novel or not a particularly "good story"' but 'a great and detailed, most melancholy picture of a civilisation in decay.'<sup>64</sup>

All of Wells's frustration with Gissing and his circle is given vent in this review: Gissing is praised, but from a position of impregnable superiority.

George Gissing was one of the most perplexing individualities I have ever met, a man of quite extraordinary charm and a certain quality of greatness that even Mr. Swinnerton's judicial moderation cannot deny nor Mr. Roberts' shocking revelations destroy. And there is no use concealing the facts that

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59 Frank Swinnerton, *George Gissing: A Critical Study* (London: Secker, 1912), pp. 43, 133 and 190-93. Wells is thanked in the book for his help, and for his definition of humour as 'that reconciliation of contradictions' (p. 149) is contrasted favourably with Gissing's lack of humour. Wells later compared Swinnerton to Gissing's detriment in *Frank Swinnerton: Personal Sketches* (New York: Doran, 1920), pp. 17-23; in a letter to Edmund Gosse in 1915, Wells describes Swinnerton as 'an authority on G.G.' and repeated the judgement of Henry Maitland as 'atrocious' and 'inaccurate.' *Correspondence*, ii, p. 433.

60 This judgement is repeated in the *Autobiography* (ii, p. 567). See Pierre Coustillas, 'The Publication of *The Private Life of Henry Maitland*: A Literary Event' in *Twilight of Dawn: Studies in English Literature in Transition*, ed. by O.M. Brack (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1987), pp. 137-52.

61 *Correspondence*, ii, pp. 45 and 313.

62 *Maitland*, pp. 119 and 302-03.

63 *Correspondence*, ii, p. 433.

64 'The Truth about Gissing', p. iii.

George Gissing was, in the fullest measured sense of the words, a humourless prig, a snob, most shamefully timid. [...] He was most attractive. He had devoted friends upon whom he could rely and to whom he could appeal. There was about him something of the magic one finds at times in an ungracious pitiful child.<sup>65</sup>

Evidently by 1912 Wells still bore a grudge against Gabrielle and Clara Collet for their, as he saw it, interfering in his trying to do Gissing's children some good: the description of Gissing's love for Gabrielle as 'transitory' and 'sentimental' is particularly unjust. In a letter to Roberts after the *Rhythm* review (which Roberts dismissed as 'chaff'), Wells criticised the portrayal of Gabrielle in the 'blazingly inaccurate' *Henry Maitland*, and blames her for Gissing's early death, as Gabrielle in turn blamed him: 'She was a tiresome weak sentimental genteel middle-class Frenchwoman who [...] worried G's last moments of life out of him.'<sup>66</sup> Gettmann suggests that Wells was 'perplexed by the life and career of his friend' and that wrangling with Gabrielle and Clara Collet had left him 'weary of the Gissing problem.' The editors of Gissing's letters attribute the tone of the account in *Experiment in Autobiography* to 'bitterness caused by the reaction of Gissing's family to his own behaviour after his friend's death.'<sup>67</sup> In this later account also, perhaps, when reviewing his own life, Wells was even more frustrated at Gissing's bafflement by the obstacles of class, poverty, and ill health that Wells had successfully vaulted to become the successful writer whose life is celebrated by *Experiment in Autobiography*. 'Perhaps Gissing was made to be hunted by Fate. He never turned and fought. He always hid or fled.'<sup>68</sup> (Interestingly, the appreciative portrait of Wells as N— in *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* hints at Gissing's suspicion that his admiration for Wells was not returned with equal strength, and Gabrielle Fleury's notes for a memoir of Gissing record his worry in 1901 that Wells was being spoiled by his success.)<sup>69</sup>

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65 *ibid.*, p. i.

66 *Correspondence*, ii, pp. 338-39.

67 *Letters*, vii, p. xxiii.

68 *Autobiography*, ii, p. 575.

69 Morley Roberts, *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, ed. by John Stewart Collis and Pierre Coustillas (London: Constable, 1903; repr. Brighton: Harvester, 1982), pp. 138-42; *Letters*, ix, p. 282. Gabrielle also confirms that 'G. attributed HGW's lack of refinement to the absence of Classical education' (*ibid.*).

The memory of his friend continued to preoccupy Wells, however. In 1912's *Marriage*, Trafford and Marjorie avoid discussion of their own feelings by talking about 'Marriage and George Gissing and Bernard Shaw and the suffrage movement and the agitation for the reform of the divorce laws': perhaps they have just read about Gissing's marriage in *Henry Maitland*.<sup>70</sup> In *The Wife of Sir Isaac Harman* (1914), the attractive novelist Mr Brumley recommends *The Paying Guest* as an explanation of the dullness of middle-class life.<sup>71</sup> Mr Britling, another novelist-hero (1916), when questioning the reality of money and credit rightly draws attention to *Veranilda*'s sense of the alienability of property:

Did she remember that last novel of Gissing's? – "Veranilda" it was called. It was a picture of the world when there was no wealth at all except what one could carry hidden or guarded about with one.<sup>72</sup>

As late as 1940, Wells reprovably compared the novelist 'Mark Benney' to Gissing for his shame of early poverty, sense of the 'real right thing to do on all occasions' and misplaced belief in 'the Lady and the Gentleman'.<sup>73</sup> In spite of Wells's temperamental antipathy to the classical world, his post-First World War project, *The Outline of History* gives substantial attention to Greece and Rome: perhaps the holiday with Gissing had stirred Wells's imagination after all.<sup>74</sup>

With the solitary exception of Arnold Bennett, Wells fell out with every writer whom he befriended. Wells's 'friendly antagonisms' with Gissing, 'our brains reacting and exchanging very abundantly' can be seen to prefigure his later and better-known falling-out with the aesthete Henry James (to whom Wells introduced Gissing in 1901).<sup>75</sup> Gissing, like James, may have occupied a position against which Wells felt he needed to react: indeed Gissing once wrote to James, 'The odd thing is that [Wells]

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70 H.G. Wells, *Marriage* (London: Unwin, 1926), p. 330.

71 H.G. Wells, *The Wife of Sir Isaac Harman* (London: Unwin, 1926), p. 370.

72 H.G. Wells, *Mr Britling Sees it Through* (London: Unwin, 1926), p. 243.

73 *Correspondence*, iv, p. 272; cf. *Autobiography*, ii, p. 634.

74 H.G. Wells, *H.G. Wells in Love*, ed. by G.P. Wells (written 1932-35, first published London: Faber, 1984), p. 28 remembers Rome during that holiday as 'mellow and beautiful'; cf. Parrinder, 'Roman Spring', p. 6.

75 *Autobiography*, ii, p. 572; *Henry James and H.G. Wells: A Record of their friendship, their Debate on the Art of Fiction and their Quarrel*, ed by Leon Edel and Gordon Ray (London: Hart-Davis, 1958).

ought to regard *me* with contempt, & yet I don't think he does.<sup>76</sup> Gissing's death was not going to stop Wells's need to argue with him as a 'topic' or 'problem' that needed authoritatively addressing.

Wells's ungraciousness to Gissing's memory was thus not simply a personal betrayal, although by decent standards of friendship much of his behaviour is indeed inexcusable. Wells, as usual, felt he knew best when it came to Gissing's estate and the disposal of *Veranilda*. Without his help, he felt the pension would never have been gained, and it was characteristic of him to wash his hands of the whole affair if not done his way. Gabrielle and Clara Collet had made him angry: he bore a grudge against the guardians of Gissing's memory and carried his anger through to the memory of Gissing himself – although Wells's continued practical concern for Gissing's sons should be noted. Regarding Gissing's work, Wells increasingly desired the novel to serve a purpose: closely-observed if grey observations on a social theme were less and less artistically satisfactory to Wells without a legible didactic purpose to power them ideologically. Wells is unlikely to have reread or much valued the bulk of Gissing's novels in the latter part of his career; yet when younger he had evidently cared for Gissing the man a great deal, and had to some extent been influenced by his work. (I have already noted the influence of Wells's social novels on Gissing, and the story of Wells's 'Miss Winchelsea's Heart' was suggested by Gissing: surprisingly, their sense of humour seems to have been one of the things the two men had most in common, as they discovered when Wells taught Gissing how to ride a bicycle.)<sup>77</sup> Wells had applauded Gissing's ability to connect the sad individual destinies of his characters to a broader social theme, and he came to see Gissing's tragedy in the same way. Gissing came to stand for the failure of the Victorian age into which they had both been born: a sensitive, highly intelligent individual crippled by Wells's two most despised social evils, poor education and class. As the peculiar syntax of this passage perhaps betrays, Gissing was too perplexing a difficulty for even Wells to solve satisfactorily:

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<sup>76</sup> *Letters*, viii, p. 288. James's reply, p. 290, casts an interesting light on his subsequent dispute with Wells, praising Wells while decidedly belittling him; see also another private letter to Gissing in *Letters*, ix, p. 42.

<sup>77</sup> *Letters*, v, p. 26, vii, pp. 117-18, *Autobiography*, ii, pp. 572-73 and 568.

So ended all that flimsy inordinate stir of grey matter that was George Gissing. He was a pessimistic writer. He spent his big fine brain depreciating life, because he would not and perhaps could not look life squarely in the eyes, – neither his circumstances nor the conventions about him nor the adverse things about him nor the limitations of his personal character. But whether it was nature or education that made this tragedy I cannot tell.<sup>78</sup>

W. Warren Wagar

H.G. Wells and the Futurist Endeavour

By training and profession, I am an historian, and a card-carrying member of the American Historical Association. I teach in a university history department. Since history has been going on now for 6,000 years, on seven continents and five oceans, and consists, at least in theory, of everything that everybody everywhere has ever done, said, or thought, that should be enough to keep me busy. Strange to say, it's not! Especially over the past twenty years, I have all but abandoned history. I seldom go to meetings of historical societies and although I subscribe to a professional history journal, I almost never read it.

Actually, my troubles with history started more than 40 years ago. When I was writing my doctoral dissertation, *H.G. Wells and the World State*, in the late 1950s, I won a U.S. Fulbright Scholarship to study for a year in London. The Fulbright Commission had to find a British mentor for me, but when it approached history faculty in the Greater London area, it was met with dismay. Your scholar is writing a dissertation on what? H.G. Wells? The chap died only a few years ago. He's not part of history. History ended in 1914 or thereabouts. So the Commission scurried around and eventually found a mentor for me in the English Literature faculty of Queen Mary College in the East End. We got along famously.

But nowadays professional historians have drifted even further away from anything that holds my interest. Politics, wars, and ideas are "out"; witchcraft,

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<sup>78</sup> *Autobiography*, p. 581.